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ABSTRACT

The two essays in this booklet reflect the spirit and ideas of Francis Christensen, specifically his exhortations to composition teachers, illustrated by his own practice, to approach the teaching of writing inductively, to look always to the writing of professionals for models, and to behave as scholars. The first essay, on sentence modelling, describes an instructional approach during which students examine variations of the cumulative sentences in scores of sentences written by a number of professional writers, imitating the methods of modification introduced to them. The second essay deals with paragraph modelling and uses Christensen's theory of the paragraph as the basis for an instructional approach during which students learn how to talk about the paragraph, discovering how its thoughts are put together. (HOD)

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Sentence and Paragraph Modelling

by

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Is it useful to be aware of one's own style, or does such awareness interfere with being natural? My belief is that, once having become conscious of the possible choices and once having made the choices, one can be secure in them and they can become natural. Knowledge and conscious choice, in other words, support rather than oppose intuition, and give it flexibility as well as ease, sympathy as well as surety, a sense of alternatives as well as a sense of preferences.

* * * * *

In speaking and writing, as in daily life, we develop certain habits of combining materials, so that we do not have to think through each combination each time. Our habits make our style.

Josephine Miles

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PRIVATE RESEARCH
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5

Introduction

by

William S. Robinson

Back in 1967, when I arrived at San Francisco State as a brand-new assistant professor of English—fresh, if that's the word, from six years of teaching Subject A at Berkeley—the composition coordinator was standing at the gates waving at us newcomers a slim yellow volume he thought held the key to the universe of composition. It was entitled *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric,* it was written by someone named Francis Christensen, and I had never heard of it. In my heart welled up skepticism. How could it be worth reading when the person recommending it didn't know anything about teaching writing and I already knew everything? Happily, I can't remember whether this was arrogance or defensiveness, but in either event it wasn't a feeling *wholly* generated by irrationality. The present academic interest in the teaching of writing had not yet developed (a scholar at the Huntington Library had already given me sound career advice: "Don't get to be known as a comp man"), the articles appearing in *College English* and *College Composition and Communication* were mostly terrible, and every new composition prophet who staggered down from the mountain turned out to have only one commandment on his tablet. Keep these people out of my way was my motto; life is more complicated than that, and I've got a lot to do.

A quick skimming of parts of the new book confirmed my prejudices. Sure enough, the pieces therein had come from the journals, and sure enough, the author did sound only one note—it is heard in four of the five essays on the sentence—and besides that, he overstated his case. "In modern English," he said, "the typical sentence in [narrative-descriptive] writing is cumulative, the main clause merely a base to which to attach, not subordinate clauses with precise conjunctions, but loosely related appositives, prepositional phrases, participles, and absolutes." In the Teacher's Manual to the later *Christensen Rhetoric Program,* he even wrote, "Anyone who learns to use the full range of free modifiers will be a skillful writer." Well, that just isn't true, as first

Sabina Thorne Johnson and later A.M. Tibbetts showed in thoughtful articles. Unlike Johnson and Tibbetts, however, whose carefully reasoned critiques of Christensen also show the genuine and lasting merit of his essays on the sentence, I dismissed the whole business and got back to work grading papers.

I didn't know it at the time, but an ally of mine had written that book. If I had taken the time to read the thing, I might have jumped on a plane, flown down to the University of Southern California, and kissed his hand. While I was teaching remedial composition at Berkeley, it had occurred to me one day to wonder whether what we were all doing in our classrooms had any connection with the writing problems that had gotten our students there. I did my own miniature study of a group of failing Subject A essays and found little connection. I was also gradually learning that much of what was in our textbooks was not certified by the practice of the writers I was reading, many of them professors of English. These were all negative lessons, but Subject A in those days was a negative, error-oriented little world. We had all the writing errors anyone could make listed on a sheet of paper, along with an abbreviation or symbol for each one, and when we got hold of a student essay, we marked every single error on it, often filling all available white spaces with red. This is the Genghis Khan school of teaching composition. So I was looking at both student and professional writing from the point of view of error. Even so, the more I looked at real writing, the less I found in the available textbooks that I wanted to teach, and I finally gave up on them altogether, relying solely on materials of my own devising. Every week I gradually turned purple in front of the ditto machine.

All this time, the little yellow book on my desk, wedged in among a bunch of others, had these passages in it:

> In composition courses we do not really teach our captive charges to write better—we merely *expect* them to. And we do not teach them how to write better because we do not know how to teach them to write better. And so we merely go through the motions. Our courses with their tear-out workbooks and four-pound anthologies are elaborate evasions of the real problem. They permit us to put in our time and do almost anything else we'd rather be doing instead of buckling down to the hard work of making a difference in the student's understanding and manipulation of language.
>
> Grammar and rhetoric are complementary, but their procedures and goals are quite different. Grammar maps out the possible; rhetoric narrows the possible down to the desirable or effective. The key question for rhetoric is how to know what is desirable. If we are

not to inflict on our students our subjective impressions, we must look outside ourselves for standards--to authority or to the practice of professional writers. The authority of the school tradition is so debased and unrealistic that it is hard to believe that it does not do more harm than good. .

Boy, my feelings exactly! But there was an even more important passage right smack in the first paragraph of the introduction to that book, in an essay now entitled "Between Two Worlds." Here is that passage:

> The English teacher, the profession of English teaching, [stands] between two worlds; but one is born, and the other, it seems, is powerless to die. The two worlds are two traditions in the study and teaching of English, two sharply contrasted points of view or attitudes toward the study and teaching of our mother tongue. The first I shall call the school tradition, the other the scholarly tradition. It is ironical that the school tradition should not be a scholarly tradition, that there should be two traditions rather than one, and doubly ironical that, since there are two, there should be any hesitation, in any teacher's mind, as to where his commitment lies. But the teaching of the English language in our schools and colleges is not a scholarly or learned profession; indeed, it can scarcely be called a profession at all. Anyone, the saying goes, can teach English [composition]; and anyone...does. My purpose is to help you see that you really have no choice between the two worlds, that to be a teacher of English in any positive, joyous, creative, and responsible sense, to be as good a teacher as it is in you to become, you must commit yourself to the learned tradition. The teacher of English [composition] must be a scholar.

Here was a person who recognized that the composition textbooks of the time—and this is still generally, although not universally, true—were flat-out awful—irrelevant, misguided, even wrong—and whose response to this woeful state of things was to start becoming a scholar of writing, to admit that he didn't know what he should be doing and to look, as he said, "to the practice of professional writers" for assistance.

I don't know how or why he got interested in this subject, but he volunteered for the job of composition director at USC and began using his position to explore it. A friend of mine, Professor David Rankin of California State University, Dominguez Hills, who has directed the South Basin Writing Project, was a student of his. He wrote me this:

> What to say about Francis? First, I guess, is that, long before it was fashionable, he made composition the subject of serious research and instruction. Personally, he had a gentle disposition and a tough mind that produced ideas quickly but expressed them

as if he were testing the value of every phrase he uttered. Physically, he was stocky, with large, strong hands befitting the Utah farm boy he once had been and in some ways remained until the end. Even while talking, he continually brushed back a hunk of sandy hair that kept sliding down on his forehead. An anecdote will illustrate how he handled his Teaching Assistants. He required us once a term to discuss with him a batch of freshman essays that we had just graded. I reported to his office late one afternoon, papers in hand, and in the soft light from the dying sun announced to him (melodramatically, I'm sure) that I was a washout as a writing teacher. Certainly, I said, he would not want to renew my fellowship. "Oh," he said, "that's pretty serious. You'd better tell me why." I explained that no matter what I did, my students continued to make the same mistakes in their compositions. "Like what?" he asked. I ran down the standard inventory of defects. "Really," he said. "That's very curious, because my students also keep doing the same things. If you find a way to help them correct those errors, I'd like to be the first one to know how you did it."

This humane professor of literature tried to make himself and his students into scientists of writing. They analyzed the prose of great novelists and essayists. They tested new ways of diagramming sentences. They counted sentences according to novel typologies. In one of Christensen's courses, Rankin wrote, "some of the *literati* had their delicate sensitivities bruised by what they regarded as a gradgrindian assault on the beauty of the language. All that counting and numbering and diagramming! He kept saying, 'I want you to see style and to have a way of explaining to students how they too can see and, indeed, produce it.'" That's the key—to find ways of enabling students to see what good writers do and then to produce good writing themselves.

Christensen was never able to finish the task he had assigned himself, the discovery of a new rhetoric based on the actual practices of excellent writers, a rhetoric to replace the hand-me-down affair of the school tradition. The title he gave his book, *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric,* is an accurate one. In his Preface he wrote, "The main concern in all the essays is with proper places—with the *structure* of the sentence and, beyond the sentence, with the *structure* of the paragraph. The rhetoric of the sentence and the paragraph has other concerns than structure, and to that extent these essays do not add up to a complete rhetoric even of the sentence and paragraph. But structure is fundamental."

I came to Christensen finally at the end of a long and exhausting search for a way of teaching the paragraph that would work, that would make sense to those writers of shapeless, gummy masses of inchoate prose who were increasingly filling our classrooms in the '70's. I had

gone through just about every text I could find, looking for something that described not only the model paragraphs in the text itself but also the paragraphs I read every day in real books and magazines. I had found nothing except the unrealistic and impractical stuff of the school tradition, when somehow my eye fell on the little yellow book. I opened it with a sigh and saw in the table of contents this title: "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph." Hmmm. I read it and was impressed. I tested the structural system of paragraph analysis therein proposed and it worked. I outlined for myself a rough method of teaching this approach to the paragraph to college freshmen, and they got it. Structure *was* fundamental. But there was something even more fundamental than that.

In reading the rest of the book, I took immediate profit from several essays, especially "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," which added a whole new dimension to my sentence work in composition classes, but I found what I now think may be Christensen's most important contribution to the teaching of writing—his exhortations to us, illustrated by his own practice, to approach our subject inductively, to look always to the writing of professionals for our models, to behave as scholars. He says it again and again:

> The school tradition has had two hundred years to prove its worth. If the almost universal dissatisfaction with the world of the schools is a valid criterion, it has manifestly failed. I know that there are teachers who have produced good results, but I think it has been in spite of the tradition. But there is a way open to improvement—that is to make the teacher of English a scholar....By "being a scholar" I do not mean that we all have to design experiments and beseige Project English for grants. I mean that we have to know what scholars are doing...I mean that we have to be close and independent observers of usage and style and accept no dictum that is not validated by our own observation and experience....And I mean that we should teach our students to write the way we see practiced craftsmen write.
>
> But the opinions of those who happen to comment on a detail of style are no substitute for standards derived from study of the usage of those who make their livings and their reputations by writing. As much as anything else we who teach composition need scores of studies of details of style. And anyone can make such studies. It doesn't take a grant and it can be done without a computer. It only takes the desire to make the hours writing (and reading) themes a little less fruitless.

In the essays by Robert Benson and James Gray in this volume, you will find the work of two scholar-teachers of exactly the kind that

Christensen was hoping to see develop all across the land. They have paid attention to what scholars—in this case, Christensen himself—have been doing, they have tested it against the reality of professional writing, they have kept that writing before their eyes as they developed their ways of using Christensen's ideas, and finally they have tested and modified their work in the crucible of their own classrooms.

The spirit of Francis Christensen fully imbues both of these essays, as it does all of the work of the Bay Area Writing Project. If BAWP ever decides to convene in synod for the purpose of electing a patron saint, Christensen, I feel, will have to be that figure.

Sentence Modelling

by

James Gray

Francis Christensen's work on the English sentence has had a lasting effect upon my own teaching of writing. What caught my attention initially and has kept my interest ever since—and it has been almost twenty years since I heard "The Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" delivered as a paper at the Asilomar Language Arts Conference—was the simple yet powerful idea that we could teach students to write by examining how real writers write, particularly by noticing the frequent use of certain phrasal modifiers in the work of many modern writers, a pattern so common that Christensen identified it as the dominant style of twentieth century prose and named it "cumulative." Christensen opened a window for me in that presentation in the early sixties, letting me "see" what I had never seen before. He pointed out a common syntactic pattern that I had never consciously noticed, even though I had read widely in the works of most of the writers he examined, even though I had long been interested in style and thought I knew something about it.

But working out a way to turn these new insights into teaching ideas took some time, and, as is the case with most teachers of writing I have known who try to adapt someone else's idea and make it their own, it took a great deal of trial and error in the classroom before I discovered what I truly wanted to present from the work of Francis Christensen and how I could present it effectively to students.

The approach that I finally fixed upon is the approach I've stayed with over the years. Although I keep refining it in small ways, adding new material, sharpening the focus, simplifying here and discarding there, the approach remains basically the same: students examine variations of the cumulative sentence in scores of sentences written by a number of professional writers. In sentences of their own they imitate the methods of modification I introduce to them, and, in the most important step in the process, they then apply these now familiar structures by writing longer, extended sequences. After several repetitions of

this pattern—sentence exercises to extended sequence—they soon have the confidence to apply what they have learned in the longer papers they write thereafter.

The Steps in the Process

As a first day exercise, prior to any instruction, I project a transparency of a photograph onto the screen—possibly a close-up of Louis Armstrong's face, or a joyous young mother hugging her baby, or an old woman, dressed conservatively in black but sitting on a trash can reading a paperback—and ask my students to write about half a page describing what they see. I ask volunteers to read papers aloud, and I begin to comment on the accuracy of certain observations and the implications of particular details. With this initial written exercise I have my own pretest sampling of student writing, written before I have taught what I have to teach, writing that can be put aside for awhile and compared later to future work. With this exercise I have also introduced my students to my use of transparencies and the overhead projector. A single photograph, blown up on the screen in a semi-darkened room, can bring a powerful moment of experience into the classroom, an experience—common to everyone in the room—that students can write about. Such writing demands close observation for the writer to capture with words what is seen. And so important is close observation with the sentence exercises that will follow that, with younger classes, I have set aside days for observation exercises before the introduction of any writing task, e.g. listing everything noticed in the photograph, listing the contributing details to dominant impressions, etc.

Following this first written exercise, I distribute a packet of prose passages, richly cumulative in style, that I have selected deliberately from both fiction and non-fiction: essay, short story, science, autobiography, history, novel, etc. The passages are short, a paragraph to a page, short enough to be read aloud. I'll read the first two passages through without comment and ask if anyone noticed any similarities in the writing of these different passages by two different writers.

> The June grass, amongst which I stood, was taller than I was, and I wept. I had never been so close to grass before. It towered above me and all around me, each blade tattoed with tiger skins of sunlight. It was knife-edged, dark and a wicked green, thick as a forest and alive with grasshoppers that chirped and chattered and leapt through the air like monkeys....Our Mother too was distracted from duty, seduced by the rich wilderness of the garden so long abandoned. All day she trotted to and fro, flushed and garrulous, pouring flowers into every pot and jug she could find on the kitchen floor. Flowers from the garden, daisies from the bank, cow parsley,

grasses, ferns and leaves—they flowed in armfuls through the cottage door until its dim interior seemed entirely possessed by the world outside—a still green pool flooding with honeyed tides of summer.

—Laurie Lee, *Cider With Rosie*
(autobiography)

Polk meanwhile was completing his preparations to evacuate Columbus, working mainly at night to hide his intentions from prying enemy eyes. This was no easy task, involving as it did the repulse of a gunboat reconnaissance on the twenty-third and the removal of 140 emplaced guns and camp equipment for 17,000 men, but he accomplished it without loss or detection. By March 2, the heaviest guns and 7,000 of his soldiers having been sent downriver to New Madrid, he was on his way south with the remainder. Within the week he reached Humboldt, the crossing of the Mobile and Ohio and the Memphis and Louisville Railroads, where he stopped. From here, his 10,000 troops could be hurried to meet whatever developed in any direction, either up where they had just come from, or down at Corinth, or back in Memphis. Little as he approved of retreat in general, the militant churchman had shown a talent for it under necessity.

—Shelby Foote, *The Civil War*
(history)

At this point the students have little idea of what I am after. I might get a response or two, but usually not much more than, "They use a lot of description." This response is not bad, really, for most of the passages are representational rather than discursive. I focus their attention on a sentence from each passage—

All day she trotted to and fro, flushed and garrulous, pouring flowers into every pot and jug she could find on the kitchen floor.

Polk meanwhile was completing his preparations to evacuate Columbus, working mainly at night to hide his intentions from prying enemy eyes.

and ask the question again. I might get more this time; I might not. In any case I am beginning to lead them to "see" what they too have seen but not noticed before:

- that both sentences start with a statement that could have been a sentence by itself,
- that both writers, with the simple use of the comma, have added more to this initial sentence,

— that the sentences, in effect, have two parts, a base clause plus additions,

— that the additions are not mere decoration, but add detail to the more general first statement,

— that the additions frequently carry the weight of the meaning.

We read more passages aloud, something from a story by Updike, an essay by Orwell, and I ask the students to identify patterns similar to those we examined earlier. The students begin to be conscious of the common pattern of base clause plus additions, and they begin to see—because I point it out—that descriptive/narrative sentences and passages are common not just to fiction but to a wide range of writing types.

To focus even more on the power and use of additions, at the beginning of the next class session we examine two or three more passages, but this time they are presented in both original and altered versions:

Altered Version (without additions)

Inside they all stood around in the bull ring. Out in the arena the picadors had galloped their decrepit horses around the ring. Then a bull came into the arena. He came out all in a rush. He stood as if he were frozen. Then he charged.

Original Version (with additions)

Inside they all stood around in the bull ring, talking and looking up in the grandstand at the girls in the boxes. Out in the arena the picadors had galloped their decrepit horses around the ring, sitting straight and stiff in their rocking chair saddles. Then, ducking his head as he came up out of the dark pen, a bull came into the arena. He came out all in a rush, big, black and white, weighing over a ton and moving with a soft gallop. He stood as if he were frozen, his great crest of muscle up, firmly planted, his eyes looking around, his horns pointed forward, black and white and sharp as porcupine quills. Then he charged.

—Ernest Hemingway

And I ask the obvious question, "What difference *do* the additions make?" There is much here that I want students to notice as we compare these different versions:

— the power of particular but ordinary detail as the stuff of good writing,

— the use of the addition as an effective way to state that detail, allowing the writing to say everything the writer wants to say,

— the possibility of using a single addition or a whole string of additions, one following the other,

– the placement of the additions, usually following the base clause but sometimes preceding it or interrupting it,

– the difference between thin texture (altered version) and dense texture (original version) and how a writer can vary the texture in his or her writing.

But I am impatient to have the students write sentences of their own, and I distribute examples of sentences demonstrating the use of the base clause plus additions that students can examine and use as models for their own writing. In time we will examine several such collections of sentences, each demonstrating a particular use of the phrasal modifier as addition. Here, for example, are nineteen sentences written in the cumulative style Christensen identifies as dominant in modern prose. The base clauses in the sample sentences are italicized.

Modern Syntax—Dominant Patterns (Free Modifiers, Additions, Phrasal Modifiers)

Examples: *He was snoring softly,* with a little bubbling at the lips at every outbreath. —Walter Van Tilburg Clark

Varner looked at him sharply, the reddish eyebrows beetling a little above the hard little eyes. —William Faulkner

Standing for a moment on the edge of the pavement to adjust his cap—the cleanest thing about him—*he looked casually to left and right and,* when the flow of traffic had eased off, *crossed the road.* —Alan Sillitoe

He lay down for half an hour, pressed under the fallen tree where he had hidden, *to give time for the thing to go right away and for his own heart to cease thundering.* —T.H. White

1. He lay for a quarter of an hour without thinking, lips parted, legs and arms extended, breathing quietly as he gazed at the figures in the wallpaper until they were hidden in darkness. —Saul Bellow
2. She draws a cigarette from the turquoise pack of Newports and hangs it between her orange lips and frowns at the sulphur tip as she strikes a match, with curious feminine clumsiness, away from her, holding the paper match sideways and thus bending it. —John Updike
3. A moment later she was swimming back to the side of the pool, her head of short-clipped auburn hair held up, straight ahead of her, as though it were a rose on a long stem. —Phillip Roth

4. Working with an enormous team of 18 editorial staffers, field editor Stuart Baird—his perpetual pallor now accented by red-rimmed eyes—could almost always be found holed away in his darkened office at the back of the cutting room, poring over footage running through the Moviola. —David Michael Petrou, from "The Making of Superman"

5. The road was littered with squashed grasshoppers; and, their wings crackling, a number of live grasshoppers sailed through the air back and forth across the road as if the summer sun, having thawed out their nearly frosted bodies, had set them abruptly to sizzling. —John Nichols, from *The Milagro Beanfield War*

6. It seemed more sedate than I remembered it, more perpendicular and straight-laced, with narrower windows and shinier woodwork, as though a coat of varnish had been put over everything for better preservation. —John Knowles

7. His walk was belly-heavy, as if he had to remind himself not to step on his own feet. —Saul Bellow

8. An occasional involuntary sob shook her—like pre-ignition in an overheated engine which has already been switched off. —Lawrence Durrell

9. Croissants, coffee, chatter, screams of laughter, two women in the ease of no child to get off to school, no husband to be fed, no boy friend to be watched for signs of a morning mood, talking, charting the movements and marriages of former friends, calling out anecdotes to each other as Peg hurried to do her hair and put on her suit, the chat so good and the time so quick and easy until the moment came when they kissed each other, hugged, promised to keep in touch, and then, suddenly, Peg was gone. —Brian Moore

10. She placed it on the table in front of Mike who stood up and carved it, cutting the slices very thin, laying them gently on the plates for the maid to take around. —Roald Dahl

11. He looked at Ralph, his thin body tensed, his spear held as if he threatened him. —William Golding

12. Lying beside the dark wharf, all strung, all beaded with round golden light, the Picton boat looked as if she was more ready to sail among the stars than out into the cold sea. —Katherine Mansfield

13. She was dressed as on the day before, in a white frock, and her shiny white boots with their high heels, her fat legs bulging over the tops of them, were strange things on that exotic scene. —Somerset Maugham

14. He shook the sand through the screen, and left the sand-crabs wriggling and scuttling on the wire, heavy little creatures, shaped like scarabs, with gray-mottled shells and orange underparts. —John Steinbeck

15. Feld could trust him with anything and did, frequently going home after an hour or two at the store, leaving all the money in the till, knowing Sobel would guard every cent of it. —Bernard Malamud

16. The hamburgers came, the plates clattering down on the counter, and the cups of coffee, the coffee sloshing into the saucers. —Robert Penn Warren

17. Now both the Warden and the deputy looked at the emissary, the deputy's mouth open a little, the cigar poised in his hand to have its tip bitten off. —William Faulkner

18. Flat and unruffled it stretched across, like a filled blue cup, to the woods on the other side. —Irwin Shaw

19. It was almost, but not quite, dark when he emerged from between the two granite pillars of the cemetary entrance; a slight boyish figure, not tall, moving with an easy swiftness, an air of confidence, no urgency, head tilted to one side although he did not dart glances in either direction, wearing a black turtleneck sweater, slim tight slacks, also black, and dark tennis sneakers. He climbed over the stone wall near the edge of the pond and turned toward the parking area, making his way between the trees, wet branches snapping at his face and his boots sinking into the sodden earth, making squishing sounds as he lifted them. —Joseph Hayes

I take a good deal of time working through many of these sentences, asking "What is the base clause?" with one, "What are the additions?" with another, and pointing out a variety of details that I want my students to notice: that the base clause can be as brief as "He looked at Ralph" (11) or of some length (2), that there can be several additions (14) or only one (7). I lead the students through a sentence like Phillip Roth's (3) with some care, and wonder aloud with them why this sentence was written as it was, suggesting that physical detail alone could not do what Roth wanted done, that he had to resort to a comparison, a metaphor, to capture what he wanted to say. We look at the sheer amount of detail provided by the additions (19) and the exotic use of this base clause-plus-addition structure in the Brian Moore sentence (9).

When I sense that the students are seeing what I want them to see—and the fact that I'm working with so many models rather than just one or two makes all the difference—I project another transparency and ask the class to observe it and put together a similar sentence out loud. I

call for a base clause, and some student will come up with something like "He stood there." "Great. Now, what can be added?" A student might say "He's crying," and I ask if this second "He" is necessary; wouldn't the single word "crying" be enough? General agreement. Fine. Additions can, as we have seen, be single words. One student questions whether the man is really crying. "Isn't he holding it back? He's trying not to cry." Better still. The students are looking closely at a photo from World War II of a grief-stricken Frenchman, and I stay with this picture until we have put together a satisfactory sentence with two or three additions. I might have students try to compose another sentence orally; I might move them immediately into writing. It depends on the signals I get from the class. But when I do feel they're ready to write I project another transparency and ask the students to describe what they see in a sentence exactly like the model sentences we've been examining together. They observe the photo closely. They write. They observe some more. They take their time, and I don't press them. They're trying to get it right. In time, after most have finished, I ask them to read their sentences aloud. No problem—*ever*! The students have given this sentence some care. It's far better, usually, than what they normally would have written. They're pleased—even proud—because of what they've been able to do, and they're interested too in hearing what the other students were able to do, working with the same material, as with the following sentences a group of tenth graders wrote about a photo from *Stop, Look and Write:*

1. Vacant eyed, he slouched against the counter, like a mannequin without support, the splintery wood biting into his arm and back.
2. He leaned against the counter top, silent, motionless, with a cup of coffee in one hand, the short remains of a cigarette in the other, and a thoughtful, rather sly look on his face; he knew it now, the terrible, haunting feeling after a doctor's first unsuccessful operation.
3. The doctor gazed sadly at the floor, fiddling carelessly with his hands, the ashes from his cigarette falling into his coffee.
4. He leaned against the counter, silent and mournful, drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette, like a convict awaiting his execution.
5. He stood, defeated and ridiculed, a beaten old man, with eyes melting in his head.
6. He is deep in thought, with head down and mouth grimly set, slumped, tired and disraveled, a warm cup of coffee in his hand.

If I hear a problem—a run-on sentence, a sentence without additions, a questionable word—I deal with it on the spot. "Take out those last two 'ands'; use commas instead. Now read it. Isn't that better?"

Most of the sentences will be good first tries; some will be excellent. I let them know that I'm pleased with what they have written, and this is no phony praise of encouragement either, for some student sentences will be as good as the models. I continue, directing the class's attention to something particularly fine, as with "She comforted him, her arm around him like a bandage," written by a tenth grade student to a photo of a young Vietnamese girl ministering to her wounded younger brother. At the close of this first session of controlled writing, there is almost always a sense of excitement, a sense of great expectations among the students. What several students have written—and no matter that it was just a sentence—was good, and they know it. I've given honest praise to many. The students know they've learned something; they'll be raring to come back for more, and in the classroom there is no greater motivation for students than the elation that comes with having learned and accomplished something.

What happens next depends solely on the particular group of students I'm teaching, and I've introduced this approach to students at all levels, seventh graders to adults. Some students and classes will need more time, another day with the basic pattern, more initial sentence practice; others are ready to apply what they've learned in longer, extended sequences. In any case I move as rapidly as I can, because I am impatient to have them apply what they've learned to something longer. But for the moment I have more to introduce at the sentence level, and I distribute selections of model sentences using the verb phrase and selections using the absolute phrase:

Verb Phrases/Clusters

1. She walked slowly, *picking her way as though she were afraid she would fall.* —John Steinbeck
2. He was exhilarating to watch, *sweating and swearing and sucking bits of saliva back into his lips.* —John Updike
3. Manual, *facing the bull, having turned with him each charge,* offered the cape with his two hands. —Ernest Hemingway
4. He stayed quite still, *listening as raptly as some wandering night-beast to the indiscriminate stir and echoings of the darkness.* —Walter de la Mare
5. Rosalind dropped the exercise-book on the floor, looked at it, hesitated, and, *putting her hands over her mouth,* went upstairs, *choking back her sobs.* —Elizabeth Bowen
6. *Standing for a moment on the edge of the pavement to adjust his cap*—the cleanest thing about him—he looked casually to the left and right and, when the flow of traffic had eased off, crossed the road. —Alan Sillitoe

7. He lay down for half an hour, *pressed under the fallen tree where he had hidden,* to give time for the thing to go right away and for his own heart to cease thundering. —T.H. White

8. The air was warm and tense, *stretched so taut that it quivered.* —Elizabeth Bowen

9. It flew in, with a battering of wings, from the outside, and waited there, *silhouetted against its pinched bit of sky, preening and cooing in a throbbing, thrilled, tentative way.* Neither did it fly. Instead it stuck in the round hole, *pirouetting rapidly and nodding its head as if in frantic agreement.* Then the pigeon fell like a handful of rags, *skimming down the barn wall into the layer of straw that coated the floor of the mow on this side.* —John Updike

10. Asa deliberately busied himself about the post, *filling the bin beneath the counter with navy beans and green coffee, leafing through the packet of letters in the drawer, making a long rite out of feeding the occupants of the picket corral.* —Conrad Richter

11. The trail moved up the dry shale hillside, *avoiding rocks, dropping under clefts, climbing in and out of the old water scars.* —John Steinbeck

12. And then the cub saw his mother, the she wolf, the fearless one, *crouching down till her belly touched the ground, whimpering, wagging her tail, making peace signs.* —Jack London

13. One remembers them from another time—*playing handball in the playground, going to church, wondering if they were going to be promoted at school.* —James Baldwin

14. The little girls heard him muttering on, *holding up one hand, patting the air as if he were calling for silence.* —Katherine Anne Porter

Absolutes

1. Sometimes I lay, *the sharp bones of my hips meeting only the hardness of the sand, the sun puckering my skin.* —Nadine Gordimer

2. All along the road to Bestwood the miners tramped, wet and gray and dirty, but *their red mouths talking with animation.* —D.H. Lawrence

3. Mrs. Koch knitted without looking, *a fine sweat cooling her brow, her eyes absently retaining a look of gentle attention,* as if she had forgotten that she was not listening to someone. —Nadine Gordimer

4. I must have stood there then—fifteen minutes shivering in my nightshirt, *my heart pounding inside of me like a ramrod working on a plugged up bore,* and listening for the gun again, if it was going to shoot some more. —Erskine Caldwell

5. They saw him later, up on the platform; he was squeaking out his little patriotic poem, *his eyes,* shining like stars, *fixed on one broad, smiling face in the audience.* —Dorothy Canfield Fisher

6. *Eyes watching, horns straight forward,* the bull looked at him, watching. —Ernest Hemingway

7. After that we rode on in silence, *the traces creaking, the hoofs of the horses clumping steadily in the soft sand, the grasshoppers shrilling from the fields and the cicadas from the trees overhead.* —E.W. Teale

8. He turned away from the window, came over to the bed where she lay outstretched, *face half-buried in the pillow, hair loose and golden, a twist of sheet barely covering her hips.* —Helen MacInness

9. Others were having trouble, too, and we pulled to the job again, and held it, *all the hoofs trampling squilch-squilch,* and *little clods popping gently out of the side and rolling toward the water.* —Walter Van Tilburg Clark

10. I had come at just the proper moment when it was fully to be seen, *the white bone gleaming there in a kind of ashen splendor,* water worn, and about to be ground away in the next long torrent. —Loren Eisely

11. It was a bright, cold day, *the ground covered with a sleet that had frozen so that it seemed as if all the bare trees, the cut brush and all the grass and the bare ground had been varnished with ice.* —Ernest Hemingway

12. At my back the turntable shirred, *the needle making a dull scrape among the last grooves.* —Saul Bellow

Within the same base clause-plus-addition structure, the students now examine the particular use of different phrasal modifiers. I highlight the differences, not only in construction but in purpose and effect. We examine model sentences, setting the verb phrase beside the absolute:

1. She walked slowly, picking her way as though she were afraid she would fall. —John Steinbeck

2. Sometimes I lay, the sharp bones of my hips meeting only the hardness of the sand, the sun puckering my skin. —Nadine Gordimer

Wanting the class to see the distinction, I ask, "How are they alike? How do they differ?" I'll read aloud again the phrase "picking her way..." against the phrase "the sun puckering my skin." They notice the similarities of the "ing" words and soon they see that the absolute phrase also has a subject added to that "ing" phrase, that the absolute, in effect, is a verb phrase with its own subject. I point out that the subject in the absolute has a real purpose, that it allows the writer to focus and then expand

on some detail, some part of the whole. In (5) Dorothy Canfield notices that the speaker is looking not at the whole Fourth of July-like crowd but at one particular face in that crowd. The absolute gives her the means to say just that. I want the students to see that these different patterns are not used willy-nilly by writers, that each phrasal modifier has its own unique use.

Again I ask the students to produce sentences aloud before I ask them to write, believing that if they can say it correctly they can write it correctly. I might pace up and down before the class, asking them to supply a base clause, an absolute, a verb phrase, another absolute. I ask the class to look at a particular student and describe exactly what they observe: "nervously tapping his pen" (verb phrase), "his left arm resting on the corner of his desk" (absolute). And then they write, and when ready, read aloud what they have written. I listen to their use of the verb phrase and the absolute. I frequently ask them to re-read a phrase, and, once again, problems that come up are worked on then and there. The verb form in the absolute causes some trouble: "her hand was raised in greeting." "Drop the 'was' and read it again." "Her hand raised in greeting." "Great."

At this point, usually by the fourth day, I ask the students to write an extended description, using the sentence patterns and the particular sentence modifiers we have been studying in a short piece that might run from a half to a full page in length. We examine more passages, and I project whole pages so that the students can "see" these sentences in context. We look closely at the powerful use of a short sentence by Updike, sentence (9) on page 16, coming as it does after a very dense passage. We note the variation in texture with different writers and I comment again on thin and dense texture and how the density of modification can vary. Students are frequently misled when they are urged to vary their sentence structure. Most sentences begin with the subject or the modified subject. It is not the structure that writers vary so much as it is the density of modification.

This extended sequence assignment is the most important step in this approach to teaching writing. I want my students to be able to use these previously unfamiliar modification patterns, so getting them to apply what they have learned is everything. Also, I'm reminded of a teacher friend who once told me, "I grant you, the sentences they write are great, but when I ask them to write on their own, it's the same old crap again." The whole point of this effort is the application. And I state this as strongly as I can to my students. I remind them that it's what I'm after. I suggest that it's OK to use these sentences in the longer piece I'm now asking of them. I tell them they will not be penalized for using these sentence patterns in their own writing. They get the point.

I send them out of the room to observe whatever there is to be seen, another student, a group of students, a particular tree, something they've never noticed before. I make the point that it doesn't matter a whit what they write about, that any content well handled can become the stuff of good writing. The students also know that they will be reading aloud the next day in small groups and that this sharing will be common practice from now on with all longer papers. With older groups I'll ask that they bring at least five copies of this first extended piece to class so that fellow group members can read along and follow what they will be reading aloud.

They come back to class with pieces like the following, pieces that demonstrate control—even mastery—of a structure they have consciously applied in a longer sequence:

> The dog moved along slowly, stopping first now to sniff the grass, then to scratch his ear or lick his side. He continued on, drawing closer to a child who, sitting on a bench, was holding an ice cream cone with both hands. The child seemed unaware of the dog's approach, his attention captured by the ice cream. Carefully, he raised the cone to his lips, and, turning it slowly around, he licked the cone from the bottom to top in a spiral motion. Then, thoughtfully, ponderously, he lowered the cone to his lap. The dog, having continued his methodical approach to the child, now drew up beside him, and lowering his backside carefully to the ground, sat down. The child stared at the dog; the dog stared at the cone. Straining his neck slightly forward, the dog extended his tongue, and raising his eyes to the child's face he licked the tip of the cone.
>
> —L. Worthington

> She sat there facing the foot traffic, one arm extended over the back of the bench, left leg crossed over the right, her left foot slowly moving back and forth as though it were a pendulum keeping time with her thoughts. Sitting perfectly erect with her head held high, as though long years of practice had taught her how to execute each of her movements with a high degree of grace and precision, she silently watched the passersby. She reached into the paper sack next to her and drew a potato chip from it. She held the chip between her index finger and thumb, daintily placed it on her partially extended tongue and pulled the chip into her mouth. She ate every chip this way, always letting it ride into her mouth on her tongue before she started to chew, never once biting into the chip, letting the crumbs fall where they might. When she finished eating the potato chips she smoothed the paper sack along the edges, folded it in half, then in fourths, and finally put it into her book

bag. She stood up, turned around to face the bench and brushed the imaginary crumbs meticulously from her chest and skirt. Next she picked up her purse, which had been resting on the bench, and stationed the strap on her shoulder, carefully assuring herself that the strap rested under—not over—the lapel of her gray blazer. She tossed her head back, placed her hand at the nape of her neck and drew it out along the underside of her long blond hair, lifting her head and letting it fall into place. With this done she picked up her book bag and joined the foot traffic.

—Carmel Zimmerman

The grizzled old bum paces the corner, papers cradled in his left arm, waving a single copy with his right. Short and rumpled, he thrusts the headlines stiffly at passersby, with arthritic emphasis, droning in a grim, monotonous voice, "final, final—closing stocks, latest sports—final." A man walks past him, resolutely ignoring his pitch; the old man turns away, cursing under his breath.

He is grey: his greasy dark hair is shot with it, his filthy black overcoat is stained a lighter shade, his baggy pants with tight checks are slate-colored, as if from too many washings in hard water. But they have never been washed, these pants. His boots, though, are new, and barely marked. One catches a glimpse of a faded red shirt underneath the overcoat, the lone hint of color in this twilit panoply; but beneath it, a grey undershirt.

His face is disproportionately long, stretched vertically by the weight of his massive jaw. A few teeth sprout from this jaw, long grey kernals streaked with yellow. The whites of his sunken eyes are yellow too, and the man uses them to great effect, transfixing one and all with a jaundiced glare that is avoided only by a conscious act of will. His very skin is slightly grey, as the years of handling newsprint have leached into the man's gnarled hands, gradually diffusing throughout his body and affecting his soul.

—David Mendelson

They wait at the bus stop, feet stamping out a restless rhythm, faces half-buried in newspapers or now and then looking up to mutter at passing cars, their eyes straining to glimpse the bus's approach. They have been waiting for over half an hour. Grim faced, a man steps into the street, bending sideways to look past parked cars. "It's coming," he announces. They now move together, clumping around the pole, jockeying for position, still silent except for occasional sighs. The bus, brakes squealing to a

heavy stop, is jammed with commuter bodies which fill the aisle completely. The riders stare out with eyes made listless by the stifling air; the people on the corner groan. The doors slide open, whooshing-in much needed air with the motion. Anxious to get on, the people on the corner collide with the few who have wormed their way through the crowd in the aisles, stopping entrance or exit completely. Like a cowboy herding cattle onto a train, the bus driver bellows and beats his hands on the hand-rail, yelling at the crowd on the corner to wait their turn, yelling at those on the bus to let people get to the exits. Driving those in the aisle back with words like a snapping whip, he makes room for everyone waiting on the corner. The silence presses heavily against the riders as bodies move unnaturally close. Standing, forced to face sideways, one woman reads a French novel; another woman mutters that at least she's not being goosed. Lurching to stops at nearly every corner, sending feet shuffling as bodies bounce together, the bus finally empties at the BART station.

—Sandy Begin

This is excellent writing by any standard, and it's writing that has resulted from a step-by-step process of instruction. The students are writing, in these short sequences, as well as the professional writers they have examined in similar short sequences, and they're writing like professionals because they're consciously employing structures commonly found in professional writing.

The students, too, reading their own work aloud and hearing what the other students have written, know that this is excellent writing. The students know that they can do it, that they can write, that they can become writers. It's an important moment in the class and one that I've been aiming at. Everything that I will ask of them from this point on, in a sequence of more and more demanding assignments, will seem possible. They know they can do it!

Before I assign other long pieces there is still more that I want to do with the sentence. Using the same approach—examining model sentences to writing their own sentences—I introduce the students to the use of the adjective phrase and the noun phrase as free modifiers. The noun phrase, we note, is not unlike the absolute with a similar focus upon particular details, but lacking the absolute's verb form it is more static. Details in the noun phrase are usually simply noted and listed. That the adjective can be a phrase rather than a single word and that this phrase can be positioned *after* rather than *before* the word it modifies—these notions come as fresh insights to my students always, and they begin to experience some of that early excitement I felt when I was led

to "see" things that I had not seen before. When students produce their own sentences using the idea of the adjective in this new way, the resulting sentences immediately seem more mature, more dramatically so with the use of this modifier than with any other.

Adjective Phrases/Clusters

1. Eva, *shy and chinless,* straining her upper lip over two enormous teeth, would sit in corners watching her mother.
—Katherine Anne Porter
2. As she came home, up the hill, looking away at the town, *dim and blue on the hill,* her heart relaxed and became yearning.
—D.H. Lawrence
3. Now his son's face, *dappled, feminine in the lips and eyelashes narrow like a hatchet, anxious and snearing,* gnaws at Caldwell's heart like a piece of unfinished business. —John Updike
4. There was the paper bag she had been carrying, lying on a table by the door; macaroons, *all squashy from being carried the wrong way,* disgorging, through a tear in the paper, a little trickle of crumbs.
—Elizabeth Bowen
5. Thus she passed from generation to generation—*dear, inescapable, impervious, tranquil, and perverse.* —William Faulkner
6. The head of the filing department, *neat, quiet, attentive,* stood in front of the old man's desk. —James Thurber
7. He saw her face, *lit, transfigured, distorted, stricken, appealing, horrified.* —Walter de la Mare
8. She had a smooth, long-suffering countenance, *slightly tearful even when she smiled, and most mournful when you met her by chance,* as Moses did on Broadway, and saw her face—she was above the average height—coming toward him, *large, smooth, kindly,* with permanent creases of suffering beside her mouth. —Saul Bellow
9. The square chimneys, *broken and uneven,* looked drunken.
—A.J. Cronin
10. Wearing the hat, Cress felt just as she had known she would: *gentle, and frail and drooping.* —Jessamyn West
11. They loved to tell stories, *romantic and poetic, or comic with a romantic humor.* —Katherine Anne Porter
12. Gabriel, *unhappy in his lyric satin and wig,* stood about holding his ribboned crook as though it had sprouted thorns.
—Katherine Anne Porter
13. Her grey eyes picked out the swaying palms, *precise and formal against a turquoise sky.* —Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

14. He awoke at two o'clock in the afternoon, *very thirsty and dizzy,* and rang for ice water, coffee and the Pittsburg papers. —Willa Cather

Noun Phrase/Cluster

1. On a sandy patch she saw her own footprint, *a little square toe and a horseshoe where the iron heel had sunk.* —Allison Uttley
2. The lighter's flame lighted up his features for an instant, *the packed rosy jowl, the graying temple under Tyrolean hat's brim, the bulging, blue, glazed eye.* —Kay Boyle
3. They will enjoy nothing but the bleakest of New England scenery—*a few hardbitten pastures, a rocky wall, a moth-eaten hill that is neither a bold mountain nor a stirring plain, and a stern and pointless old house.* —D.C. Peattie
4. All the magic of Camusfearna was fixed in that morning: *the vivid lightening streak of an otter below water; the wheeling, silver-shouldered flight of the geese as they passed to alight ahead of us; the long, lifting, blue swell of the sea among the skerries and the sea tangle; the little back rivers of froth and crystal that spilled back from the rocks as each smooth wave sucked back and left them bare.* --Gavin Maxwell
5. For hours at a time, he sat on the backless kitchen chair before the shack, *a wide-shouldered man,* white bearded, motionless; *a seer despite his grotesquely baggy trousers, his collarless shirt.* —Sinclair Lewis
6. The chestnut stallion was coming into its strength, *gleaming, round quarters, bunched muscles at the juncture of the throat and chest, a ripple of high-light and shadow on the withers, arched neck, pricked small Arab ears, a bony head, eyes and nostrils of character and intelligence.* —Oliver LaFarge
7. She sat thus, forever in the pose of being photographed, *motionless image in her dark walnut frame with silver oak leaves in the corners,* her smiling gray eyes following one about the room. —Katherine Anne Porter
8. He was a fellow I disliked and feared; *a handsome, sulky, spoiled and sneering lout.* —Frank O'Connor
9. August got the license of the county clerk, *a little crippled man with one shoulder higher than the other.* —Ruth Suckow
10. I had found before a bank of crocuses, *pale, fragile, lilac-colored flowers with dark veins,* pricking up keenly like a myriad of little lilac-colored flames among the grass, under the olive trees. —D.H. Lawrence
11. The world outside the deep-silled windows—*a rutted lawn, a*

whitewashed barn, a walnut tree with fresh green—seemed a haven from which he was forever sealed off. —John Updike

12. Now and then she came in with a shallow box full of newly hatched chickens, *abject dabs of wet fluff*, and put them on a table in her bedroom where she might tend them carefully on their first day. —Katherine Anne Porter

13. What one could see of her face made a striking impression—*serious hard eyes, a long slender nose, a face waxen with thought.* —Joyce Carol Oates

14. The great passions of man, *his lust for power, his vanity, his search for truth, his passion for love and brotherliness, his destructiveness as well as his creativeness, every powerful desire which motivates man's actions,* is rooted in this specific human source. —Erich Fromm

15. This seemed an utterly enchanted sea, *this lake you could leave to its own devices for a few hours and come back to, and find that it had not stirred, this constant and trustworthy body of water.* —E.B. White

16. They sped down the road in a black car, *an expensive limousine designed for speed,* and soon after came another. —F. Scott Fitzgerald

17. He remembered how he had stood, *a small, thrilled boy,* prepared to follow the dingy lady upon the white horse, or the band in its faded chariot. —Stephen Crane

18. There was only the sound made by a man in the corner who drew noisily on a pipeful of rum-flavored tobacco, causing it to glow on and off, *a red disk in the dark.* —Ralph Ellison

19. About fifteen miles below Monterey, on the wild coast, the Torres family had their farm, *a few sloping acres above a cliff that dropped to the brown reefs and to the hissing white waters of the ocean.* —John Steinbeck

20. He tilted back in his chair, and leered at each gentleman, separately, *the leer of an animal that knows its power, the leer of a leopard loose in a bird-and-dog shop.* —James Thurber

After these two sentence modelling exercises, examining the use of the noun and adjective phrases and experimenting with these modifiers in their own sentences, the students write another extended sequence, and at this point in the class, usually the end of the second or third week, my intensive work with sentence modelling is over. It never altogether stops, however. I point out the use of other phrasal modifiers and clausal structures used as additions, e.g., prepositional phrases, and "as if..." and "as though..." constructions, and I continue to bring in new passages to

examine, their own best work as well as professional examples. But the emphasis until the end of the course will be on applying what students have learned to the writing of longer papers—autobiographical fragments, personal essays, profiles, saturation reports, essays—assignments that move, as a sequence, from the personal and the immediate to the more distant and general, to assignments that place a premium on the use of representational prose in the exposition and development of ideas.

I've saved most everything students have written over the years, and I'd like to be able to close with an anthology of the excellent student writing that this approach to teaching writing has sparked, but short of presenting everything that has pleased me, I'll close with two short passages as a sampling of all the rest:

Autobiographical fragment

> It is summer, hot and breezy, lazy and playful. Across the street, there is a park with children playing baseball and four-square, and an old, red bungalow with a ping-pong table, all kinds of balls, and more children. From here, through the curtains, one can see the baseball game, a disorganized affair, with no uniforms, few mitts, one ball, and one bat.
>
> Here, inside a room, a small boy is sitting tensely at a piano, producing what might loosely be called music. On a long, gray sofa sits a thin, ancient woman, the music teacher, listening to the boy's sounds.
>
> "No, no, no!" she cries. "That's wrong! Start again."
>
> The boy says nothing. His jaws are clenched, fist-like and quite as threatening. His eyes are riveted straight ahead, though they don't seem to be focused on the music. He dashes a quick, angry glare at the old woman, much too quick for her perception. His fingers reach tentatively, stiffly for the keys, as if he were a spastic, trying desperately to control himself. The sound comes stumbling and jerking out of the piano, and anger and disappointment cover the old woman's face. She sits perfectly still and bolt-upright, poised like a jungle cat about to spring, but stiff like the starched curtains on the window. The anger covers her face, but her body rigidly holds it back. She only screeches at the boy and his unsatisfactory, forced performance, her screech hectic and atonal, like the music. They sit inside a room, caged like birds, the boy pecking away at the piano, the old woman pecking away at the boy.
>
> Outside, summer continues to flow, formless and easy.
>
> —James Beasley

From a saturation report on what became of the Haight-Ashbury district in San Francisco

> Today the ghosts of this dream haunt the streets of the Haight. The faded, peeling paint of the storefronts, like ancient ruins of a long-dead civilization, barely reveals the once bright aliveness of the people who lived there. The streets are still filled with young people, but there is a deathlike air about them, wandering zombie-like along the sidewalks, trying to make a little bread by selling the BARB to passers-by, lurking in the dark doorways, pale and tired, rarely smiling, their eyes grown old. At the end of this sad street is Bob's Drive-In, open twenty-four hours a day, gathering place for those who find themselves cold and tired, in need of coffee and juke box, in the darkest hours of the night.
>
> —Ann Kibling

What Josephine Miles suggests will happen, that "knowledge and conscious choice...support rather than oppose intuition," has indeed happened. The students are secure in the knowledge of what they can do. Their use of cumulative structures is now natural and intuitive, and they write with a mature and easy style.

Paragraph Modelling

by

Robert Benson

I could no more imagine teaching writing without Francis Christensen than I could imagine teaching without chalk. By Christensen I mean "Francis Christensen's theory of multilevel paragraph structure," but on the syllabus it's just Christensen, and that's how it's referred to by most of my colleagues in the Composition Department at San Francisco State University. Christensen is the first thing down on my syllabus, the first thing I actually teach to my students, and I rely on it mostly because I have found that nothing seems to reach a student as quickly and nothing de-mystifies the writing process as readily as the discovery that real world paragraphs tend to follow patterns and that a professional writer's route through the paragraph may be graphically portrayed according to its structure. "Oh yeah, I see what she's doing: first she does the topic sentence, and then she goes down one level and says that, and then the next two sentences are parallel illustrations, and then she comes back up to a higher level ...." It's easy, they find, even rather obvious—once they know how to look.

I use Christensen as the cornerstone in my effort to get students to look more closely at their own writing and at the writing of others. For all the essays they've written, many students have never had the experience of standing face to face with a paragraph before; they have never really stopped to examine its structure, its logic, the nuts and bolts of it, the particular way it moves from beginning to end. In other words, they have never stopped to examine how it *works*. And for good reason: something as complex as paragraph structure is difficult to examine unless you have access to a theory of some kind, a system or a terminology. Christensen is invaluable to me precisely because he provides that terminology. After the students learn how to talk about the paragraph, they are able to look more closely at it; they can see the way it hangs together, they can lift up the cover and watch the moving parts, they can understand the way it works.

Francis Christensen first published "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph" in 1965. In that article he proposed that most real-world paragraphs written by professional writers could be diagrammed by using a system of descending levels to make evident the writer's pattern of thought. After analyzing hundreds of such paragraphs, Christensen evolved a theory of the paragraph as a multilevel structure, or a sequence of structurally related sentences, and he found three basic patterns again and again in professional writing. The theory was beautiful, but the distance between it and the classroom was immense; applying Christensen was a little like belling a cat, and the theory remained, for the most part, on the theoretical level. However, some educators have been able to bridge the gap: in the early seventies, Bill Robinson at San Francisco State set to work finding practical applications for Christensen in the classroom, and he managed to turn Christensen's insights into functional tools that any college freshman could use. Since then, these tools have served to introduce students at S.F. State to the complex craft of expository writing. The following pages illustrate how I present these tools in the classroom, and how my students use them throughout the semester.

I begin my writing course with the paragraph. In Christensen's terminology, a paragraph is a unit of discourse, an orderly sequence of thought, and to emphasize that word *sequence* I immediately introduce my students to a guiding metaphor: the train of thought. I remind the students of something they already know: in everyday life, as we go about our daily business, our thoughts do not usually follow any logical or organized sequence; in other words, they don't connect together very well. Thoughts drift here and there depending on what catches the attention at any given moment. "It's hot in here. Tomorrow's the last day for drop/add. Have to go to the bathroom. Nice shoes he has on. What's for lunch?" Rarely do we find ourselves thinking clearly and concisely along a given line, rarely do our thoughts unfold in an organized sequence. Yet for a writer, the organized sequence is the key. As I tell my students, the writer must work to establish a train of thought so that readers may follow the connections he or she makes between ideas. And I emphasize that the writer—not the reader—is responsible for showing these connections, for showing how one idea leads easily on to the next.

At this point, impatient to give the students a working sense of what the word *sequence* means, I introduce the basic difference between narrative writing and expository writing. (These terms translate into other equivalent sets, but these are the ones we use at S.F. State.) "Take out a piece of paper and write a paragraph about what you did today since you woke up." The students comply in ritualistic fashion, putting down the chronological details of their day. When they are done, I ask them to tell me how they organized the material. "Well, first this happened, so I

wrote that, and then this other thing happened, so I wrote about that...." In other words, I point out to them, your sentences are organized according to a *time frame;* your paragraph unfolds the same way your day did. For in narrative, as in life, it's usually a case of one damn thing after another, and all the students have to do in this exercise is set it down in a chronological sequence. The organization is already built into the paragraph structure; the students don't have to do anything more than write "and then...and then...and then" to show the connection between their sentences.

But exposition, I say, is different, for even though exposition often includes narration, it has another purpose. Exposition tells the reader what the writer knows or thinks about something, and expository prose usually contains sentences that are not related chronologically. The writer must therefore work harder to show the connection between sentences and between the ideas they contain. To illustrate this point, I ask the students to write for ten minutes about why they are in college. They readily admit that the second assignment is harder, and they have a good idea why: there's no simple time frame in exposition.

These exercises serve as a preparation for Christensen. With as much of a flourish as freshman composition will allow, I announce to the students that I'm now going to show them how good writers—professional writers—get through an expository paragraph, and then I introduce them to Francis Christensen's theory of paragraph structure.

The simplest kind of paragraph, according to Christensen, is organized as a sort of list: the topic sentence at the top, with all the other sentences serving as more or less parallel illustrations of the topic. He called this type of structure the *coordinate sequence* to emphasize the relative equality of all the sentences following the top sentence:

> (a) Versions of the 50-50 marriage are cropping up all over the country. (b) In Berkeley a research economist quit his job so his wife could continue as a radio program coordinator while he takes care of their two children. (c) A Boston lawyer feeds and dresses his children each morning because his wife often works late for the National Organization for Women. (d) In Detroit an industrial relations specialist does all the cooking and his social worker wife keeps the family books.
>
> — *Time*

In this paragraph, the first sentence presents the topic at a high level of generality; it is in Christensen's parlance a *level 1* sentence. The three sentences which follow are specific illustrations of the topic, and they occupy a secondary level:

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 2
(d) 2

I tell the student to look at first words of these three *level 2* sentences to see how alike they are: each zeroes in on a particular city and a particular 50-50 marriage within that city. The three sentences are parallel, or as Christensen would say, in a coordinate sequence. And because they all depend equally upon the level 1 sentence at the top, they share the same level; they hang suspended from the topic as specific illustrations that work in the same way.

A second example comes from E.B. White. In 1943 White received a letter from the Writer's War Board asking him for a statement on "The Meaning of Democracy." He responded with a masterful piece of writing that also happens to be a pure coordinate sequence paragraph:

> (a) Surely the Board knows what democracy is. (b) It is the line that forms on the right. (c) It is the don't in don't shove. (d) It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; it is the dent in the high hat. (e) Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time. (f) It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths, the feeling of communion in the libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere. (g) Democracy is a letter to the editor. (h) Democracy is the score at the bottom of the ninth. (i) It is an idea that hasn't been disproved yet, a song the words of which have not gone bad. (j) It's the mustard on the hot dog and the cream in the rationed coffee. (k) Democracy is a request from a War Board, in the middle of a morning in the middle of a war, wanting to know what democracy is.

The ten sentences which follow the top sentence illustrate the topic, each from a slightly different angle—but again, a glance at the sentence openers will show that they are all cut from the same cloth. They invariably begin with "It is" or "Democracy is," and they all exist in the same equal relationship with each other. They are, in fact, practically interchangeable, as is the case with most sentences in the coordinate sequence: the third sentence may come after the eighth sentence without doing too much damage to the paragraph. The skill of the writer in this instance belies the fact that this paragraph is the simplest of all structures—a list. In the Christensen schema it would be diagrammed as follows:

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 2
(d) 2
(e) 2
(f) 2
(g) 2
(h) 2
(i) 2
(j) 2
(k) 2

A few more examples of the "pure" coordinate sequence:

(a) The fact is that there are men who do care about their children. (b) They diaper them, feed them, walk with them in the middle of the night, worry about their physical development and emotional growth. (c) They side with them against unreasonable teachers and struggle through homework with them when it increases at an astronomical rate. (d) They put Band-Aids on their cuts and suffer with them the emotional bruises that will take no bandaging. (e) They hug their children when they cry, and their own eyes get wet at the sight of their kids growing into strength and independence.

—Alan Alda

(a) Nowadays a ship likes to pretend that it is a hotel. (b) It has an elevator with a skinny boy in charge: a boy who has been poured into a tight suit glittering with brass buttons. (c) It has bellboys who go about carrying silver salvers and calling "Mister Blah!" (d) It has fireplaces and Chesterfield sets, modernistic lighting fixtures and Turkish rugs, hammered brass ashtrays, silken hangings and the like. (e) It even has grand pianos, with cigarette burns on the polished mahogany.

—J.E. Middleton

(a) It is important to visualize the condition of the Guard as they begin their retreat at Kent State. (b) They have been on duty for nearly a week, sleeping at odd times and in odd places. (c) They have eaten irregularly and been subjected to taunts and ridicule. (d) They are bewildered by the behavior of college students and outraged by the vocabulary of the coeds.

—James Michener

(a) Like so much of the San Bernardino Valley, Banyan Street suggests something curious and unnatural. (b) The lemon groves are sunken, down a three- or four-foot retaining wall, so that one looks directly into their dense foliage, too lush, unsettlingly glossy, the greenery of nightmare. (c) The fallen eucalyptus bark is too dusty, a place for snakes to breed. (d) The stones look not like natural stones but like the rubble of some unmentioned upheaval. (e) There are smudge pots, and a closed cistern. (f) To one side of Banyan there is the flat valley, and to the other the San Bernardino Mountains, a dark mass looming too high, too fast, nine, ten, eleven thousand feet, right there above the lemon groves. (g) At midnight on Banyan Street there is no light at all, and no sound except the wind in the eucalyptus and a muffled barking of dogs.

--Joan Didion

I have found that after three or four coordinate paragraphs presented chorally, the students are ready to move on to the second of Christensen's three basic structures: the *subordinate sequence*, so called because each sentence in the paragraph is directly subordinated to, or dependent upon, the sentence immediately preceding it.

(a) The cougar has a disturbing habit of following people. (b) It will trail a person silently for miles without threatening or attacking, often making no effort at concealment. (c) This audacious behavior is certainly nerve-racking, but there seems to be nothing sinister in its motive. (d) The cougar is curious: that is all.

— *High Country News*

This paragraph is obviously much different from the previous coordinate sequence models. The fourth sentence depends directly on the third sentence; the third sentence depends on the second; the second depends on the first. There are no interchangeable parts here; the sequence is fixed. And instead of a list composed of like structures hanging from the top sentence in straight parallel lines, we have a sequence of steps leading inexorably downward, level after level after level, showing a tighter interdependency among the sentences than exists in the coordinate sequence paragraph:

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 4

The following models also fall under the category of the "pure"

subordinate sequence:

> (a) What got me interested in Space Colonies a few years ago was a chance remark by a grade school teacher. (b) She said that most of her kids expected to live in space. (c) All their lives they'd been seeing "Star Trek" and American and Russian space activities and they drew the obvious conclusions. (d) Suddenly I felt out-of-it. (e) A generation that grew up *with* space, I realized, was going to lead to another generation growing up *in* space. (f) Where did that leave me?
>
> —Stewart Brand

> (a) Merchants of the German port of Hamburg had acquired the Baltic taste for scraped raw beef, but it was not until the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 that broiled, bunned beef was introduced to the rest of the world by the Germans of South St. Louis as hamburger. (b) Americans quickly latched on to the hamburger as their all-time favorite. (c) For a bustling people it offered a combination of convenience, economy and tasty nourishment that seemed just what the doctor ordered. (d) As a matter of fact, it was. (e) Its more glamorous hotel-menu name, Salisbury steak, harks back to the end-of-the-century London physician, Dr. H.J. Salisbury, who invented a diet based on broiled lean minced beef three times a day. (f) Nowadays, alas, some American children are unconsciously such fans of Dr. Salisbury's diet that they will eat nothing else. (g) One desperate mother we know has dubbed it "the daily grind."
>
> —Irma Rombauer

The paragraph above from *The Joy of Cooking* illustrates an interesting process of a train of thought: beginning with one aspect of the topic, the writer deftly maneuvers her way around to examine other aspects as well, with each sentence preparing the way for the next step. This process is what Christensen had in mind when he referred to a *generative* rhetoric of the paragraph—sentences at higher levels generating those at lower levels. As diagrammed, the hamburger paragraph develops this way:

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 4
(e) 5
(f) 6
(g) 7

I do these paragraphs chorally, writing the level for each sentence on the board as students call it out to me.

The following are further illustrations of the pure subordinate sequence, indications of how sentence leads on to sentence:

(a) The process of learning is essential to our lives. (b) All higher animals seek it deliberately. (c) They are inquisitive and they experiment. (d) An experiment is a sort of harmless trial run of some action which we shall have to make in the real world, whether it is made in the laboratory by scientists or by fox-cubs outside their earth. (e) The scientist experiments and the cub plays. (f) Both are learning to correct their errors of judgment in a setting in which errors are not fatal. (g) Perhaps this is what gives them both their air of happiness and freedom in these activities.

—Jacob Bronowski

(a) Professional wrestling offers fans an almost unparalleled opportunity to indulge aggressive and violent impulses. (b) A few appreciate the finer points of a take-down or a switch or a Fireman's Carry, but most would walk out on the NCAA wrestling finals or a collegiate match. (c) They want hitting and kicking and stomping and bleeding. (d) Especially bleeding.

—William C. Martin

(a) A young man might go into military flight training believing that he was entering some sort of technical school in which he was simply going to acquire a certain set of skills. (b) Instead, he found himself all at once enclosed in a fraternity. (c) And in this fraternity, even though it was military, men were not rated by their outward rank as ensigns, lieutenants, commanders, or whatever. (d) No, herein the world was divided into those who had it and those who did not. (e) This quality, this *it*, was never named, however, nor was it talked about in any way.

—Tom Wolfe

(a) The only trouble is, a well-applied tattoo is quite permanent. (b) Getting a tattoo, in fact, ranks among the few absolutely irreversible individual human acts. (c) A tattoo can be covered up by another equally dark or darker tattoo; countless ex-sweethearts' names now rest unseen beneath snarling black panthers or screaming eagles. (d) But neither the various folk remedies (vinegar, stale urine, mother's milk, garlic, pepper and lime, excrement of pigeon) nor the best medical techniques (abrasion, chemicals, surgery, even laser surgery) are entirely effective. (e) Some trace of the tattoo, some scarring, some disfigurement is almost certain to remain.

—George Leonard

A word about possible applications. When students are reasonably comfortable with the system after seeing a number of such models, I start them building the structures on their own. To elicit coordinate paragraphs, I give them a top sentence—"Being a student means you are in for a difficult time"—and ask them to continue onward from there with a series of parallel level 2 sentences. Sentences may begin with "It means" or "Being a student means," but students are obliged to go on for as long as they can, spinning out sentences in E.B. White fashion:

> Being a student means you are in for a difficult time. It means having to work long hours without pay. It means feeling as though your time is never your own. Being a student means that your family is after you to stop typing at 1 a.m. It means that you miss three movies you wanted to see. It means wondering if the work will never end. It means turning in your third essay on the day you find out you got No Credit on the second essay. Being a student means you are always worrying whether your grades are lower than anyone else's. Being a student means riding overcrowded buses in the morning. It means falling asleep in the library in the afternoon. It means going to sleep at night and dreaming that you will be a student for the rest of your life.
>
> —Jill Mullikin

In asking the students to build a subordinate sequence paragraph, I have them go back to the previous topic: "Why are you in college?" Earlier it had discouraged them, but this time they are aided by the visual image of a series of sentences connected by a sequence of descending levels, each sentence leading on logically to the next. "It's like going downstairs," I tell them, and the object in this exercise is to go down as far as possible, to establish an unbroken sequence of thought, to follow the route suggested by each sentence as it is written.

> Why am I here? I am here because I am really getting bored with the post office. I work in the mail sort room, and this means you spend all your time sorting and carrying mail. I have to carry 50 pound sacks of mail and dump them onto a conveyor belt for two hours a day. I don't mind hard work, but can't you imagine yourself after twenty years of abuse to your back? You would be next in line for the Quasimodo look-alike contest. I want out, and school is a good way to escape. If I get a degree, I might have a better chance of finding a job that doesn't require so much physical exertion. I guess you could say I'm in school to save my aching back.
>
> —Rafael Gonzales

I am now ready to have them tackle the third and remaining paragraph structure—what Christensen calls the *mixed* sequence. This is the prototype—the kind of paragraph that Christensen recognized as being by far the most prevalent.

Logically enough, it is nothing more than a mixture of the two previous "pure" types, but I take my students into it slowly because I want them to be fully aware of exactly how the logic in this type of paragraph unfolds. First I show them the following sequence by Catherine Drinker Bowen and ask them to analyze it.

> (a) All artists quiver under the lash of adverse criticism. (b) Rachmaninoff's first symphony was a failure, so he took sick. (c) When Beethoven heard that a certain conductor refused to perform one of his symphonies, he went to bed and stayed there until the symphony was performed. (d) Charles Dickens was forever defending himself against criticism, writing letters to the press and protesting that he was misunderstood.

"Well, it's got a topic sentence up there at the top, and then the other three sentences are all at level 2." "Why?" "Because each of those three sentences is about a particular artist, and they're all parallel supports, and they're kind of like a list." Correct, I say—but as it happens, this is *not* Bowen's original paragraph; this is not the way she originally wrote it. I have simplified it, made it into a coordinate sequence, in order to show paragraphs may be made more detailed and complex with only a little more work. I then show them the original paragraph, italicizing the sentences that were omitted in the truncated version:

> (a) All artists quiver under the lash of adverse criticism. (b) Rachmaninoff's first symphony was a failure, so he took sick. (c) *He lay around on sofas for a year, without writing one measure of music.* (d) *But he eventually recovered, and went on to write much more music.* (e) When Beethoven heard that a certain conductor refused to perform one of his symphonies, he went to bed and stayed there until the symphony was performed. (f) Charles Dickens was forever defending himself against criticism, writing letters to the press and protesting that he was misunderstood. (g) *Yet neither criticism nor misunderstanding stopped his output.*

This completed paragraph is clearly not a pure coordinate sequence, nor is it a pure subordinate. Instead, it is a combination of the two, a *mixed sequence.* The Rachmaninoff sentence and the Dickens sentence both branch out to lower levels, becoming more specific. This is getting the best of both worlds, I tell the students—this is playing two dimensions at once: coordinate and subordinate. Diagrammed, the paragraph looks more complex than the others:

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 4
(e) 2
(f) 2
(g) 3

It is at this moment that I first suggest to the class a major perceptual point: that they should begin to look at *their own* paragraphs in light of these multilevel structures. We are, after all, looking at professional paragraphs for the express purpose of improving student paragraphs. In fact, many of the suggestions I will be giving the students about their writing throughout the semester come from this lesson, and many of my questions will use the same terminology I am now presenting. "Could that sentence be developed to a couple of lower levels? Could you think of another parallel example here? You're still on a high level of generality in this paragraph; could you bring it down to a lower level?" These are the questions they will be hearing from me again and again during the semester, and they will eventually get used to looking at paragraphs as multilevel structures that are capable of being developed and analyzed. Hereafter, "Christensen" is to mean the same thing to them as it does to me: the visual representation of paragraph structure, the scaffolding.

After this introduction, I continue with the mixed sequence. The following passage by Abraham Maslow is, again, a truncated paragraph, all sentences past level 2 omitted; I present it in this fashion because it is an excellent example of how a paragraph may be developed downward from the general to the specific:

> (a) The best case I ever ran across of a compulsive-obsessive man was one of my old professors. (b) He was a man who very characteristically saved things. (c) He was also a man who labelled everything, as such people will do.

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 2

A simple sketch: two traits of the compulsive-obsessive personality, and little more. But the original paragraph has *much* more: details that bring the old professor and his quirkiness clearly into view. Again, every previously omitted sentence is italicized:

> (a) The best case I ever ran across of a compulsive-obsessive man was one of my old professors. (b) He was a man who very characteristically saved things. (c) *He had all the newspapers that he*

had ever read, bound by weeks. (d) *I think each week was bound by a little red string, and then all the papers of the month would be put together and tied with a yellow string.* (e) *He saved his old razor blades.* (f) *He had all his old razor blades stored away in the bathroom closet, nicely packaged.* (g) He was also a man who labelled everything, as such people will do. (h) *Once in his laboratory, he spent hours trying to get a label on a little probe of the sort that didn't have any space for a label at all.* (i) *And once I turned up the lid of the piano in his laboratory and there was a label on it, identifying it as "Piano."*

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 4
(e) 3
(f) 4
(g) 2
(h) 3
(i) 3

Here we have two examples of how the old professor saved things, each developed to level 4. And we also have, at the end of the paragraph, two parallel examples of his labelling mania. Maslow's portrait represents a combination of subordination and coordination sequences, and it shows the connection between lower levels of generality and the wealth of specific detail available in any description. The visual effect of all the information that has been added, along with the diagram of the paragraph on the board, leads the students to see that interesting things begin to happen once the writer descends to lower levels of generality. "Lower levels equals more detail," I suggest.

Another round of models presented chorally will give an indication of how comfortable the students are with the idea of the mixed sequence. After these are diagrammed and discussed, I put the students into pairs and give them a few more paragraphs to work with on their own.

These first twelve or thirteen paragraphs must be chosen very carefully. They must be entertaining enough to keep the students interested in their new task and to keep them from feeling that they're being deluged with mere exercises. Further, they must be the *clearest* possible examples of the Christensen schema, since my primary concern at this point is to establish a solid base for the new terminology. Paragraphs, of course, are usually much more complex than the models I present in the classroom, but for the introductory lessons, clear examples are the key.

So important is the clarity at this stage, I will occasionally alter a paragraph, in the interests of good pedagogy, to make it serve as a better classroom model.

I have included a number of other mixed sequence models at the end of this essay, along with an analysis of how they may be diagrammed.

This presentation of the Christensen multilevel paragraph takes three or four days to unfold in the classroom, but the effects are meant to continue throughout the semester. How, then, do my students actually use Christensen as they write their essays? It is certainly possible to keep giving students paragraphs to diagram all semester, but this is not necessary, and I myself usually stop with a dozen or so models. Instead, I find that Christensen hereafter works best behind the scenes. The concept and the terminology live on, but in a less obvious guise.

First of all, the Christensen schema serves hereafter as a *perceptual tool* for many students. After being shown a dozen or so models, the students discover that they can look at a paragraph—their own or another writer's—and see what is going on. That is, they can *look* at a paragraph. This experience is invaluable, particularly for inexperienced writers. Using the concept of the multilevel structure, students can chart the writer's train of thought, see the point to which it tends, and observe the flexible movement of sentences from general to specific and back again. They understand that, in a well-written paragraph, the relationships between the individual sentences are clear. Sentences may connect in numberless ways, of course, but they *do* connect, and that is what the instruction about levels and coordination and subordination was intended to illustrate.

But Christensen's use as a tool to enable students to look more closely at paragraphs brings up an important side issue: what happens when some students study a model paragraph and see something quite different from what another student sees, or, for that matter, from what the teacher sees? This is, actually, an inevitable moment in the progress of the lesson, for as the class moves beyond the simpler paragraphs, they indeed look closely enough to see the hairline differences in interpretation possible in the structure of many paragraphs. Every class to which I have taught Christensen, in fact, has had a number of students who saw something different from what I saw. "That seems like a level 6 sentence, not a level 5. Or maybe it's a level 7." At such moments, Christensen's basic usefulness as a perceptual tool can become an issue.

Consider, for instance, the following paragraph:

(a) When to eat what is a matter of ever-changing habit and custom. (b) Think of an epicure's diet in pre-Communist China: the constant nibbling of small rich confections, interspersed with light, irregularly-spaced meals. (c) Think of the enormous breakfast, late dinner and bedtime repasts of early nineteenth-century England. (d) And, if you imagine for a moment that we have triumphantly freed ourselves from such excesses, think of the multitude of strange hors d'oeuvres that are downed during a typical big cocktail party in the Age of Anxiety.

— *The Joy of Cooking*

A simple coordinate sequence, I had thought: the first sentence was clearly the topic, and the other three sentences were clearly a list, all at level 2. But in the classroom my interpretation was challenged: the fourth sentence, they claimed, was *not* parallel with the others, because of the clause at its beginning ("And, if you imagine for a moment that we have freed ourselves from such excesses"). The fourth sentence therefore depended on the others, and so it was at level 3.

Their logic was clear, and I had no reason not to accept it, but I simply asked them to consider both interpretations as valid. "It depends on how you look at it. The fourth sentence *does* complete the list, but it also seems slightly dependent on the others for its effect, so it can go either way." I take this position with other ambiguous paragraphs: there is not necessarily one correct interpretation of a paragraph's structure, and if an alternative explanation is logical, it may stand. "The Christensen schema," I tell them, "is not a rigid, die-cast system. You must be flexible when working with it. If you are too rigid, the system will crack. If you see these paragraphs simply as mechanical structures, or if the structure becomes all-important, you're drifting away from the point. The system is merely a device to allow you to look more closely at paragraphs." I am obviously not interested in codifying a system or in devising a tight network of rules that can cover any exception to the general patterns; I know that if we do not maintain flexibility in our discussions, the whole purpose of using Christensen can be forgotten. In the classroom, I have defused a number of arguments (level 5?! level 7?!) by simply saying, "Anyway, you can see what the writer is doing here, can't you?"

These discussions, or arguments, are actually a positive sign, for they indicate that the students are beginning to try out their new terminology, to play with the concept, to manipulate what they are learning. Potential ambiguities in a paragraph's structure provide an excellent forum for discussion, and they allow the students to scrutinize the paragraph at closer range. Winning or losing an argument is beside the point. As long as I stress flexibility, I can work out rough approximations of a

"right" interpretation or allow for multiple interpretations. It is important to reiterate, however, that the very first models presented to the class should be as free from ambiguity as possible. Ambiguity can be helpful, but not at the beginning.

Aside from Christensen's use as a perceptual tool, he also works well as a *revising tool.* The great difficulty with student writers is that they often prefer to stay at a maddeningly high level of generality. One essay begins, "Most teachers don't really care if the students learn or not; they're just there because they're getting paid." "Okay," I say, "now if you can just support that with a couple of good sentences on level 2 and develop each one of those down to level 3 or 4, *then* I'll accept it." I want the student to descend into specifics—quite literally in this case, since the concept of "levels of generality" implies a descent into more detail. Christensen allows me to show the student the seams at which his paragraphs need more development. "Oh, this part is still too general; why don't you take it down a couple of levels and explain more clearly. Remember that paragraph I showed you at the beginning of the semester, about the guy who saved his old razor blades?" I try to make the student recognize these seams on his own, or at least understand that a paragraph is a flexible movement from general to specific. But I prefer saying "Could you take this down to a couple of lower levels?" to "Could you be more specific here?" because it's a more specific way to ask the student for more detail, and because it has a referrent beyond the teacher's personal preference.

As a revising tool, Christensen is also helpful in pointing out to students when they have broken the line of thought in a paragraph. Suppose, for instance, a student had written the paragraph which begins, "The cougar has a disturbing habit of following people," but he had added an irrelevant sentence in the middle: "I once knew a man who owned a couple of cougars." This sentence is misplaced, but if the student has the Christensen terminology, all he need be told is that the sentence *breaks the subordinate sequence.* "Don't put it there, it interferes with the train of thought; the sentence after it doesn't connect. Put it in a new paragraph, or find a way to connect it at the end." Here, Christensen may serve to remind the student writer that, in a good paragraph, the sentences are structurally related. "Writing a paragraph," I say, "is like anything else in life: it's a matter of making the right connections."

Christensen's final use is as a production tool. Yet this use is clearly limited. To produce a paragraph according to the demands of a structural form is an unnatural act; that is not how people write. In most real-world paragraphs, form follows content, not the other way around.

No writer has ever sat down and said, "Okay, first I'll start off with a coordinate sequence and I'll follow through with a mixed sequence and then wind up with a subordinate sequence going down to level 9." All the same, students can usually benefit from the experience of deliberately producing a complex paragraph along structural guidelines. So I assign at least one: "You must write a mixed sequence paragraph, coordinate *plus* subordinate structures, using at least three level 2 sentences and at least one level 5 sentence."

The reasons for such an assignment? First of all, I agree with Josephine Miles, who argues that student writers need to gain a *conscious* appreciation of how to manipulate different structures before that manipulation becomes unconscious habit. Of course students will be affected by nothing more than exposure to a generous number of model paragraphs; all the same, I prefer that they consciously set out, at least once, to imitate the models. Second, the multilevel form is a convenient, utilitarian mode of organization, and when students are faced with writing assignments in their other classes—such as answering essay questions on a test—they may want a form to fall back on, a structure they can rely on. The multilevel paragraph is, if nothing else, a structure which allows for the tidy assembly of whatever information the student may be expected to deliver. Finally, the assignment benefits those weaker writers who have great trouble conceptualizing organization strategies. Christensen for these students is more than just a scaffold; it is a raft. With the visual representation of the multilevel sequence in mind, they may finally be able to put together serviceable paragraphs and understand how to move from A to B to C. Fluent writers could be hampered by a too-rigid reliance on structure; not-so-fluent writers may find it extremely useful in their struggle to understand this mystery of words on paper.

My most successful assignment goes by the general title of "I am blank." In this assignment, I give the students the first two words of their top sentence: "I am _____." They are then obliged to complete the sentence—depending on who they are—and to develop it in a complex multilevel paragraph. Two model student essays appear below:

> (a) I am picky. (b) I'm the kind of guy who doesn't like to see the threads on the top of the ketchup bottle all ketched up, or jam sticking to the side of the jar. (c) I will spend long moments wiping the threads clean with hot water and cleaning the cap so that it feels good when it is applied to the jar or bottle. (d) Toothpaste is another one of my hangups. (e) The container must be rolled up so that there is no lost space within, where the toothpaste could go and hide, thus avoiding its fate. (f) Never, in my presence, install the toilet paper incorrectly on the roller. (g) Of course, anyone knows what incorrectly is: that is when the paper comes off

the roll at the bottom. (h) You have to reach sometimes four inches further to grasp it in that position. (i) Coming off at the top is not only much more convenient, it is right! (j) And proper! (k) At a restaurant, when served a drink and accompanying napkin, I always have to place the glass on the napkin perfectly, drawing imaginary crosshairs diagonally across the opposite corners and then centering the glass on these guidelines. (l) Why should I set the glass down just anywhere? (m) Another item that must be just so is my bank balance. (n) No, not even one penny off. (o) Not even in my favor. (p) It's not mine, and I don't want it! (q) Sometimes it's not easy, being so picky, but I couldn't stand to be any other way.

—Steven Miller

(a) I am paranoid. (b) I just know that thieves are lurking out there ready to steal my beat-up '68 VW the moment I let my guard down and transform it into a racy dune buggy. (c) I have an elaborate ritual that I go through to thwart their every effort. (d) I look around for suspicious characters, park my car, put my keys in my purse, roll up the windows, lock the wind wings and the passenger door, pick up my purse, get out of the car and lock my door. (e) If anything disturbs this ritual, I regard it as bad karma and park elsewhere. (f) I also know that of all the apartments in the city, my place is staked out at least once a month by thieves who think my role as a poor student is just a cover. (g) I go to great pains to enter my building when no strange cars are in the street and have been known to wait in the pouring rain until unfamiliar people have passed before I will open my door and give away my exact place of residence. (h) I am no fool. (i) I have valuable Corningware that would fetch a neat price at the flea market. (j) Thieves lurk everywhere and are just waiting to sneak their hands into my purse and steal my money. (k) They don't realize they are dealing with a very clever paranoiac. (l) I place my purse under my arm with the zippered side against my body. (m) It would take a punch in the nose to get my VISA card! (n) I am definitely a "Class A" paranoid individual, but as long as you don't glance covetously at my car, my purse or my Corningware, we could be friends.

—Coni Whisler

Sometimes I also provide the students with two or three sentences on higher levels of generality and ask them to develop those sentences to lower levels. As an example:

People spend a great deal of money to maintain appearances in our culture. For instance, look at all the money spent on clothes

and cosmetics. _____

_____

_____

_____

And consider the reasons for buying a fancy car. _____

_____

_____

_____

The Christensen system allows me to model paragraphs for my students, and I do not ask much more of it than that. I do not uphold it as infallible, and I readily admit that some paragraphs defy analysis. Christensen himself catalogues the "anomalies"—paragraphs with no topic sentence, paragraphs with illogical sequencing, paragraphs with a topic sentence in the previous paragraph, paragraphs that take two or three sentences to get properly under way—but I do not make a point of presenting the details of his findings to the class. It is helpful for the teacher to know them, however, and they are laid out quite clearly in "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph" (included in *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric,* Harper & Row, 1967). If the issues come up, I address them; otherwise I let sleeping dogs lie. Christensen is an excellent pedagogical device, and it is refreshing to bring real-world paragraphs into the classroom instead of relying on textbook models, but I do not wish to throw a multilevel template over all the paragraphs written in the real world. Limitations exist in Christensen's system, and I try to w within them. I use it to model paragraphs for my students, and they it to look more closely at their own writing, and that is more than enough to ask of any system.

Mixed Sequence Models

I have appended a number of mixed sequence models for a slightly closer analysis. The following, from *The Joy of Cooking,* needs practically no explanation:

> (a) If you have never made yeast bread, behold one of the great dramas of the kitchen. (b) Every ingredient is a character. (c) Yeast is the prima donna. (d) Her volatile temperament is capable of exploitation only within given limits of heat—and does she resent a drafty dressing room! (e) Wheat flour is the hero. (f) He has a certain secret something that makes his personality elastic and gives convincing body to his performance. (g) Rice, rye, corn, soy—no other flour can touch him for texture, but he is willing to share the stage with others—if they give him the lime light. (h) Water, milk or other liquid ingredients are the intriguers. (i) Any one of them lends steam to the show. (j) As for

salt and sugar, they make essential but brief entrances; too much of either inhibits the range of the other actors. (k) Fat you can enlist or leave. (l) Use him to endow your performance with more tender and more lasting appeal. (m) There are quite a few extras, too, which you can ring in to give depth and variety. (n) Allow some ad-libbing with nuts and raisins, herbs and sprouts.

I diagram this paragraph as follows:

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 4
(e) 3
(f) 4
(g) 5
(h) 3
(i) 4
(j) 3
(k) 3
(l) 4
(m) 3
(n) 4

The structure of the following paragraph, from William C. Martin's "Friday Night at the Coliseum," is likewise self-evident, although there may be some controversy over whether sentences (e) and (f) are coordinate or subordinate.

(a) For many regulars, the wrestling on Friday night at the Coliseum in Houston is the major social event of the week. (b) All over the arena blacks, browns, and whites visit easily across ethnic lines, in perverse defiance of stereotypes about blue-collar prejudices. (c) A lot of people in the ringside section know each other, by sight if not by name. (d) Mrs. Elizabeth Chappell, better known simply as "Mama," has been coming to the matches for more than twenty-five years. (e) Between bouts, she walks around the ring, visiting with old friends and making new ones. (f) When she beats on a fallen villain with a huge mallet she carries in a shopping bag, folks shout, "Attaway, Mama! Git him!" and agree that "things don't really start to pick up till Mama gets here." (g) When a dapper young insurance salesman flies into a rage at a referee's decision, the fans nudge one another and grin about how "old Freddy really gets worked up, don't he?"

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 2
(d) 3
(e) 4
(f) 4
(g) 3

I choose to think of sentences (e) and (f) as coordinate, since they each illustrate what Mama does on Friday night and because they each use the same base clause structure: "she walks" in (e), "she eats" in (f).

Sentences (b) and (c) also admit of some ambiguity. I see them as coordinate simply because they illustrate two ways in which "the wrestling on Friday night at the Coliseum in Houston is the major social event of the week."

> (a) *Marijuana and the class of '71 moved through high school together.* (b) *When we came in as freshmen, drugs were still strange and new; marijuana was smoked only by a few marginal figures while those in the mainstream guzzled beer.* (c) It was called pot then—the words grass and dope came later. (d) *By my sophomore year, lots of the seniors and even a few younger kids were trying it.* (e) *By the time I was a junior—in 1969—grass was no longer reserved for the hippies.* (f) Basketball players and cheerleaders and boys with crew-cuts and boys in black-leather jackets all smoked. (g) *And with senior year—maybe because of the nostalgia craze—there was an odd liquor revival.* (h) In my last month of school, a major bust led to the suspension of half a dozen boys. (i) They were high on beer.

I use this paragraph from Joyce Maynard's "An 18-Year-Old Looks Back on Life" the same way I use Abraham Maslow's paragraph about the compulsive professor. The italicized sentences form a simplified version to which the other sentences are then added. The simplified version diagrams as a straight coordinate sequence; the original version diagrams as follows:

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 2
(e) 2
(f) 3
(g) 2
(h) 3
(i) 4

One potential problem with this paragraph is that it might appear to be narrative rather than expository. The sequence is, after all, chronological: first this happened, then this happened. However, the paragraph is not strictly narrative because Joyce Maynard is interested in charting the climate of opinion from year to year; she is working primarily with ideas, only embedding them in a chronological framework. She is not so much interested in showing *that* marijuana and the class of '71 moved through high school together as she is in showing *how* they moved through high school together.

The following paragraph, in the "pure" expository mode, subdivides neatly after the top sentence.

> (a) Americans and Arabs have different rules for the use of public space. (b) When two or more Americans are talking together in public, they assume that the ground they are standing on is, temporarily, their own joint territory and that others will not intrude. (c) In fact, anyone who has to skirt the edges of such a conversational grouping will markedly lower his head as he does so. (d) If the group is actually blocking his way and he has to pass through it, he adds a verbal apology to the lowered head. (e) On the other hand, to the Arab, public space is public space. (f) He does not acknowledge the rights of others to claim public space as their own territory. (g) If he is waiting for a friend in a hotel lobby and another person has a better vantage point, the Arab may come and stand right next to him, moving in quite close. (h) Very often this tactic succeeds in driving the other away—furious but silent. (i) Unless, of course, he is also an Arab.
>
> —Paul Campbell

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 3
(e) 2
(f) 3
(g) 4
(h) 5
(i) 6

Sentences (c) and (d) are good discussion points—are they coordinate or subordinate? I see them as coordinate, since they illustrate two situations involving the American use of space. However, other readers may see sentence (d) as subordinate to sentence (c) since the language suggests a slight dependency. The person in (c) lowers his head; the person in (d) *adds* a verbal apology to the lowered head.

(a) Whereas the other tribes are relatively recent arrivals, the Pygmies have been in the forest for many thousands of years. (b) It is their world, and in return for their affection and trust it supplies them with all their needs. (c) They do not have to cut the forest down to build plantations, for they know how to hunt the game of the region and gather the wild fruits that grow in abundance there, though hidden to outsiders. (d) They know how to distinguish the innocent-looking *itaba* vine from the many others it resembles so closely, and they know how to follow it until it leads them to a cache of nutritious, sweet-tasting roots. (e) They know the tiny sounds that tell where the bees have hidden their honey; they recognize the kind of weather that brings a multitude of different kinds of mushrooms springing to the surface. (f) The exact moment when termites swarm, at which they must be caught to provide an important delicacy, is a mystery to any but the people of the forest. (g) They know a secret language that is denied all outsiders and without which life in the forest is an impossibility.

(a) 1
(b) 2
(c) 3
(d) 3
(e) 3
(f) 3
(g) 4

This paragraph, from *The Forest People* by Colin Turnbull, is a coordinate sequence at heart, since it is basically a list. The last sentence may be said either to continue the sequence one more step downward, to level 4, or to revert back to a higher level, perhaps level 2. It is, in effect, a conclusion to the paragraph, and while it does follow naturally from sentences (c) through (f), it could also come before them without doing any damage to the paragraph. It is this fluidity of paragraph structure, in fact, that makes the examination of it so engaging. The parts may be broken down and reshuffled, and that may lead to a more flexible perception of what a paragraph is and does.

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